

Research Report

Promoting a Message on Vision Loss to Diverse Groups of Adults

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Visual impairment is the second most prevalent disability among older adults (National Center for Health Statistics, 1993), affecting about 2.9 million Americans aged 65 and older (Eye Diseases Prevalence Research Group, 2004). As the population ages, the number of individuals who will experience age-related vision loss will also increase. Therefore, there will be a greater need for educational interventions that provide information about the typical changes in vision that

people will experience as they age, changes in vision that are due to age-related eye diseases, and information on how and where to receive vision rehabilitation services.

Research also supports the need for educational outreach. One study demonstrated that when it comes to knowledge about age-related vision loss, people often assume that vision loss is a normal part of aging. In one national survey of older Americans, 57% of the respondents believed the following statement to be true or did not know if it was false: All older people will become visually impaired as a part of the normal aging process (The Lighthouse, 1995). This myth can be dangerous because if people assume that vision loss is a natural part of aging, they may not seek help.

Additional analyses of these data revealed that older Americans generally held positive attitudes toward people with visual impairments, but concurrently exhibited limited knowledge about age-related vision loss and pervasive fears of blindness relative to other disabilities. The attitudes, knowledge, and fears of people with visual impairments were comparable to those of the general population, which suggests that visually impaired individuals have internalized society's general negative stereotypes about vision loss (Horowitz, Reinhardt, Brennan, & Cantor, 1997).

Also of great concern are the findings that demonstrate the pervasive lack of knowledge about available

services. Among a sample of adults aged 55 and older with self-reported visual impairments, 24% reported that such an agency was not available in their local area, and 35% said they were not sure about the existence of a local vision service agency (Horowitz et al., 1997).

As important as it is to educate older individuals who may or may not experience age-related vision loss, it is equally important to educate younger individuals, who may have an older relative or friend, about normal and disease-related changes in vision and the benefits of vision rehabilitation services. Research has shown that adjustment to vision loss is furthered by family members' understanding of the limitations caused by vision loss (Horowitz, Reinhardt, McInerney, & Balistreri, 1994) and by their provision of emotional support (Reinhardt, 2001). High levels of emotional support from family members can also facilitate successful rehabilitation outcomes (Dumas & Sadowsky, 1984; Greig, West, & Overbury, 1986; Horowitz et al., 1998; Moore, 1984).

In 2003, Lighthouse International (Sussman-Skalka, Stuen, & Cimarolli, 2003) conducted a large-scale national outreach campaign, called "Vision Loss Is Not a Normal Part of Aging," which was supported by funding from the Andrus Foundation of the American Association of Retired Persons (AARP) and the National Eye Institute. The goal of the campaign was to increase awareness about key research findings on

visual impairment and vision rehabilitation, including the prevalence of vision loss among older adults, information about normal age-related vision changes versus those related to age-related eye disorders, the functional and emotional impact of vision loss on the individual and family, and the benefits of vision rehabilitation. Multiple educational materials were developed and disseminated free of charge through various dissemination strategies (radio public service announcements, news releases, and web letters) to older adults directly and through organizations (agencies in the aging and vision networks and public libraries). The educational materials included two booklets: *Vision Loss Is Not a Normal Part of Aging--Open Your Eyes to the Facts!* (a publication that was specifically designed for older adults with information on normal changes in vision as people age and vision changes that are due to eye diseases) and *Family and Friends Can Make a Difference: How to Help When Someone Close to You Is Visually Impaired* (a publication that was geared toward family members and friends of individuals with low vision that provides resources and tips on how to provide support). The two brochures were made available in English and Spanish, as were the radio public service announcements.

The evaluation of this outreach effort documented that 1,104 organizations and 965 individuals nationally and in four foreign countries requested more than 279,000 publications. In addition, 196 individuals (nonprofessionals) who read the materials were

interviewed, and nearly 80% of them rated the value of the publications as either "very informative" or "informative" and 70% reported having gained new information. Furthermore, more than 50% said they would change their behavior related to their eye health because of what they read. With regard to what exactly they would do differently, two foremost behavioral changes emerged: (1) getting their eyes checked regularly ($n = 41$, 39.4%) and (2) being more alert and cautious about warning signs ($n = 24$, 23.1%) (Sussman-Skalka et al., 2003). It needs to be noted, however, that the results of the evaluation of this dissemination effort are limited in that the majority of the people who chose to complete the evaluation surveys were female and white.

In making future dissemination efforts more effective, it will be important to determine not only whether outreach efforts are effective in terms of reach and impact, but which vehicles for the dissemination of printed materials on vision loss and aging work best for reaching diverse groups of individuals. Therefore, the purpose of the present study, representing a further analysis of data that were collected for the evaluation of Lighthouse International's educational campaign (Sussman-Skalka et al., 2003), was to determine which types of dissemination strategies (the Internet, newspaper, radio, library, or area agency on aging or senior center) would be the most effective in reaching individuals who differ in age, gender, race, and vision loss with information about vision loss and aging.

Method

Participants

The participants were 133 self-selected individuals who had read the educational materials on vision loss and aging that were disseminated as part of the national outreach campaign and had completed a feedback survey indicating how they heard about the educational materials (Sussman-Skalka et al., 2003). The average age of the 133 respondents was 64 years (with an age range of 22-91), and 73% ($n = 95$) were women. Of the 129 participants who reported their race or ethnicity, the vast majority were Caucasian (89%; $n = 115$), 6 (5%) were African American, 5 (4%) reported that they were of another race or ethnicity, 2 were of Hispanic descent (2%), and 1 was Asian or a Pacific Islander (1%). Forty-nine percent of the participants reported having a vision problem even when they used eyeglasses or corrective lenses, and 42% reported having a family member or friend with a vision problem.

Procedure

To obtain feedback from individuals, a "Your Opinion Counts" feedback page was included in the two educational booklets. This page informed individuals that they could give feedback and complete a questionnaire in one of three ways: (1) calling a toll-free number to answer questions by telephone, (2)

sending an e-mail message to a Lighthouse contact person to request a questionnaire electronically, or (3) logging on to a specific link on a web site that contained the questionnaire. As an incentive, individuals were offered a small free gift for their input and time. In addition, those who requested materials via the Lighthouse toll-free Information and Resource Service telephone number were asked if they would be willing to give feedback about the materials and were then contacted by e-mail or telephone (depending on their preference). Of the 133 participants, 48 completed the survey online, and 85 completed it by telephone.

Measures

The questionnaire included questions on basic demographic information (age, gender, and race). In addition, the participants were asked if they experienced vision problems even when wearing contact lenses or eyeglasses (yes or no) and how they found out about the publications (Internet, newspaper, radio, library, or area agency on aging or senior center) using a multiple-answer format.

Results

The respondents reported that they found out about the materials in a newspaper article ($n = 67$, 50%), on the Internet ($n = 27$, 20%), at a library ($n = 20$, 15%), at an area agency on aging or senior center ($n = 14$, 11%), and on the radio ($n = 5$, 4%).

Logistic regression analyses

Logistic regression analyses were used to examine the effects of sociodemographic variables--age, gender (female versus male), race (white versus nonwhite) and reports of having a vision problem (yes versus no)--on having found out about the publications through the different dissemination strategies (newspaper article, Internet, radio, library, and area agency on aging or senior center).

In the logistic regression analysis predicting the likelihood of having found out about the publications from a newspaper versus other means, age and gender emerged as significant predictors. Higher age was associated with a greater likelihood of having found out about the publications through a newspaper article, specifically a 5% increase with every year of increased age. In addition, women were 72% less likely than were men to have found out about the publications through a newspaper article. Overall, this model explained 30% of the variance (see [Table 1](#)).

In the logistic regression analysis predicting the likelihood of having found out about the publications on the Internet versus other means, age emerged as the only significant predictor. Higher age was associated with a reduction in the likelihood of having found out about the publications on the Internet, specifically a 6% reduction with every year of increased age. Overall, this model explained 27% of the variance (see

Table 1). The remaining logistic regression models that predicted having found out about the publications from the radio, a library, and an area agency on aging or senior center were not significant and did not yield any significant predictors.

Discussion

The findings from these data analyses demonstrate that age was a factor in determining the effectiveness of two dissemination strategies: the effectiveness of reaching individuals through newspaper articles and reaching individuals through the Internet. It appears that newspaper articles are a more effective strategy in reaching older individuals and that the Internet represents a more useful tool in reaching younger individuals. Therefore, when trying to reach individuals of different age groups with a health-promotion message, educators should rely on multiple dissemination strategies. Moreover, women were less likely than men to have found out about the educational materials through a newspaper article. Hence, newspaper articles as a dissemination strategy may work especially well in reaching men with a message on vision loss. But this finding applies only to Caucasian men, since the majority of the sample was Caucasian.

Limitations

The study had three major limitations. First, it relied on

a self-selected, convenience sample and therefore represents these individuals exclusively. Second, the findings are limited because the participants were predominately women and Caucasian. Consequently, because of the lack of diversity in this sample, the examination of the effect of gender and race on dissemination strategies is somewhat premature. Finally, the study was limited in that only a limited number of sociodemographic variables were available for the analyses. Hence, the findings should be viewed as preliminary and should spark future research on the effectiveness of outreach campaigns on vision loss in reaching and educating individuals of different backgrounds. Such future evaluations should select a random sample for follow-up regarding feedback and should include not only sociodemographic variables, such as educational and income level, but personality characteristics and social resources.

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